

No room for excuses: Buffon

Football

AGENCIES, Florence

Italy goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon said there will be no room for excuses when they face beaten World Cup final rivals France in what is expected to be a hot-tempered Euro 2008 qualifier on Saturday.

"It's a very important match that we must win. There can be no room for excuses," Buffon, who was between the posts for Italy when they triumphed in the World Cup final in 2006, said Thursday.

Italy will be without controversial defender Marco Materazzi as the match in Rome after he picked up a thigh injury in an embarrassing 3-1 loss to Hungary in Budapest last month.

However Buffon said the absence of Materazzi, who was famously head-butted by Zinedine Zidane after he goaded the France playmaker with an insult about his sister, could take some of the heat out of the match.

Materazzi said last month he had made a mistake in sledging the French icon, who was sent off for his assault on the Inter Milan in the World Cup final, which France subsequently lost in a penalty shoot-out.

"Without Marco we lose some depth but perhaps that will make it a calmer game," said Buffon.

"There will be nobody looking for revenge against anyone else, and no players will be singled out."

But the controversial Materazzi has further stoked the competitive fires.

While the Italian squad has kept quiet and intends to do it's talking on the pitch, the injured Materazzi couldn't resist responding when questioned by a French newspaper.

"We will win. France will lose at the San Siro," he told Le Figaro. "It won't be the battle of all battles, but it is an important game."

"I take my hat off to the French fans for the atmosphere they created at the game in Paris and I hope that the San Siro will be just as good an atmosphere."



(L) Italian players Daniele de Rossi (L), Fabio Grosso (C) and Fabio Cannavaro tussle for possession during a training match at the federal technical centre in Florence on Thursday while (R) French strikers David Trezeguet (L) and Thierry Henry (R) take part in a training session in Clairefontaine on Friday.



PHOTOS: AFP

Gerrard fit to start

Football

AFP, London

Steven Gerrard will brush off his injury woes and line up for England against Israel on Saturday, but fellow midfielder Owen Hargreaves appears to be losing the race to be fit for the crucial Euro 2008 qualifier.

Gerrard, who has a broken toe, was able to play a full role in a training session on Friday while Hargreaves will only be risked if he comes through a late fitness test on the day of the match, head coach Steve McClaren revealed.

"Stevie has trained twice this week without an (pain-killing) injection and if he plays tomorrow like he did this morning everyone will be delighted," McClaren said.

"That's the kind of performance that we need and it's a big boost for everybody, most of all Stevie G because he desperately wants to play in this game. He came through it with no problems whatsoever."

McClaren added: "With Owen, we will leave it as late as possible to make a decision. He wants to play and we will give him every opportunity to do so."

The England coach also revealed that he had decided to persevere with Paul Robinson in goal, keeping faith with the Tottenham stopper despite a series of high-profile mistakes in recent months, including the one which led to Germany's first goal in a 2-1 friendly defeat last month.

McClaren said he had been impressed with Robinson's form in training this week. "He has done very, very well. He has always had my trust and confidence and I'm sticking with him."

England have been hit by a string of injuries to players including Wayne Rooney, Frank Lampard and David Beckham.

But McClaren insisted the mood in the camp was confident after three good days of preparations.

"This is not a friendly, it is the real thing. There can be no excuses, we have good enough players to win tomorrow and go on to the next game," he said.

McClaren would not be drawn on whether the recalled Emile Heskey would start alongside Michael Owen in attack, in the absence of the suspended Peter Crouch.

"All the strikers have done well this week," he said. "But the biggest

boost we have got is that Michael Owen is fit and looking sharp. He has scored in his last two games and the biggest thing is not who is going to play with him but who is going to supply him, deliver the balls into the areas where he is so dangerous."

England skipper John Terry echoed McClaren's optimism about Gerrard's readiness, which has taken on greater significance because of the absence of Lampard, who is hoping to be fit in time for Russia's visit to Wembley on Wednesday.

"It was a full contact training session the manager wanted for Stevie and the other lads to make sure they were fully fit and they came out 100 percent, so it's great news."

Hargreaves is struggling with a thigh injury suffered during training on Wednesday and was restricted to light jogging with England physiotherapist Gary Lewin on the eve of the match.

Aston Villa's Gareth Barry is expected to be handed defensive duties in the centre of midfield if Hargreaves fails to recover sufficiently to play in a match England must win if they are to retain a realistic chance of reaching next year's finals in Austria and Switzerland.

Maradona will lead 1986 replay

INTERNET, undated

Diego Maradona will lead Argentina in a replay of the 1986 World Cup quarterfinal against England at Villa Park next month.

Maradona, whose 'Hand of God' goal and brilliant individual effort minutes later helped the South Americans to a 2-1 win in Mexico en route to winning the tournament, is set to play in the match which will feature the original line-ups from 21 years ago.

The game will be played on October 14, kicking off at 4pm. Maradona said: 'It's a game I still treasure to this day. For the rest of the team and I it was very special and was a great victory on the way to winning the World Cup.'

'Everyone talks about the 'Hand of God' from this match, it was a bit of mischief, the goalkeeper had the advantage of grabbing with his hands. It was too high for me and I stuck out my fist. 'After the goal, I was waiting for my teammates to embrace me and no one came. I told them, come hug me or the referee isn't going to allow it. This time when we will come to England there will be no mischief, only great goals. For us this is very serious, we are coming to win.'

Former England midfielder Peter Reid, one of the players left trailing in Maradona's wake for the second Argentina goal, said: 'It's one of those games that's talked about so much and meant so much that it's impossible to forget how devastating it was to lose and to lose to one absolutely amazing goal but also to one which was, let's say, a little dubious!'

'This is our chance to show what we can do and get a little bit of revenge. They've said they're coming to play and that's fine by us, we're going out to win - no question.'

ITALY V FRANCE

Controversy goes on

Football

AFP, Milan

France coach Raymond Domenech and Italy defender Marco Materazzi are threatening to steal the spotlight when both sides meet for a potentially hot-tempered Euro 2008 clash at the San Siro on Saturday.

Group B leaders France face their World Cup final conquerors without Domenech on the touchline following the Frenchman's one-match ban by European football's ruling body UEFA for bringing the game into disrepute.

Italy, who sit second and two points adrift of France, will line up without Inter Milan defender Materazzi who as well as being injured seems to be still involved in a tit-for-tar war of words with Domenech.

The root of their ongoing feud can be found in the World Cup final,

when Materazzi was famously head-butted by Zinedine Zidane after the Italian had goaded the France playmaker with insults about his sister.

Behind the reams of insults and insinuations that have been traded since the incident, there are points on offer which, with Scotland and Ukraine still in the mix, both sides can ill afford to miss out on.

Italy have been making most noises about who will dominate in Milan, and Materazzi - who like Domenech will watch from the sidelines - has made his contribution.

"France are a great team, but on Saturday they will lose at the San Siro," Materazzi told French newspaper Le Figaro on Thursday, admitting he will find it difficult to watch the match.

"It's going to be agony for me sitting in the stands. I will suffer, and I think Domenech will find it just as hard as I will."

"But I'm sure that my friends (Gennaro Gattuso and (Fabio

Cannavaro, who are from the south (of Italy) like me will do all they can to show who the world champions are."

Materazzi's absence is unlikely to leave a gaping hole in the defence being lined up by Italy coach Roberto Donadoni.

And while he says Italy pose a formidable challenge, France midfielder Florent Malouda believes the absence of their coach could be motivational.

"Materazzi is still quite an influential player, in the sporting sense, but Italy have plenty of players to replace him," said Malouda.

"If he was there it would have added a bit more spice to the match, but it's Italy we're playing against, not Materazzi."

He added: "We will have to be focused because a match like this could be decided by the smallest of details, and because of the coach's absence it is up to us to be more focused on the job."

France are likely to line up in a flexible 4-2-3-1 formation which

could see either Bolton striker Nicolas Anelka or Barcelona's Thierry Henry spearhead the French attack.

But whatever formations Domenech and his Italian counterpart Donadoni decide upon, all eyes will be watching for the niggling tackles and gestures that have the potential to spark unrest.

Malouda says the French will not bow to any intimidation as they bid to pull clear of their pursuers.

"We know there's going to be a bit of intimidation, and that Italy will be totally up for this match."

"They're going to try and put us under pressure, and try to provoke fouls," added the Frenchman.

He hinted that Zidane's dramatic head-butt, the playmaker's last competitive footballing gesture before his retirement, is still quietly haunting them.

"We will have to be strong mentally and try to keep our cool. Now, we know the things we shouldn't be provoked into doing."

Loew to question Chelsea

Football

INTERNET, undated

Germany boss Joachim Loew is to contact Chelsea next week to ask them to explain Michael Ballack's exclusion from their Champions League squad.

The Germany captain is currently recovering from ankle surgery and does not figure in his club's 23-man party for the group stages of the competition.

Chelsea insist they took the decision because they could not guarantee Ballack would be fit for the majority of their six group matches, suggesting he will not return until the end of October at the earliest.

However, Loew is confident of having his influential midfielder back

for his side's European Championship qualifiers next month and cannot understand why the English club are less optimistic in their assessment of his fitness.

'For us, Chelsea's decision is unfounded,' said Loew.

'After the internationals, I will call Chelsea because it would certainly be interesting to find out why Jose Mourinho has made such a decision.'

'At the moment, nobody can quite understand it.'

According to Sport Bild magazine, Ballack was in Munich yesterday undergoing further tests to clarify the extent of his injury with Germany and Bayern Munich team doctor Hans-Wilhelm Muller-Wohlfahrt.

It appears it is not only Loew who finds the whole injury situation puzzling. The player himself is

caught between pillar and post, according to the Germany coach.

Loew said: 'Michael cannot quite explain for himself why Chelsea have not nominated him for the Champions League.'

Ballack's Champions League omission has fuelled speculation he will be sold when the transfer window re-opens in January but yesterday saw Chelsea rubbish such suggestions.

Bayern president Franz Beckenbauer has ruled out Ballack returning to the Bavarians in the winter, although Serie A leaders Juventus are a different option.

According to reports in Italy, the Bianconeri are considering making an offer in January, based on the recommendation of their former Bayern midfielder Hasan Salihamidzic.

Football

AFP, London

Arsene Wenger has signed a three-year contract extension that will keep the Frenchman at Arsenal until 2011 and make him the longest-serving manager in the Gunners' history, the club announced on Friday.

Wenger, 57, had indicated at the end of last week that he was ready to commit what could be the final years of his managerial career to the north London club.

But confirmation that he has finally put pen to paper will still come as a huge relief to supporters after months of uncertainty over Wenger's future and the disappointment of Thierry Henry's summer departure for Barcelona.

Wenger, whose services have long been coveted by a long list of top clubs, headed by Real Madrid,

was shaken by the April departure of Arsenal's former vice-chairman David Dein, the man who brought him to London and a close friend as well as a boardroom ally.

But he revealed on Friday that he had never seriously considered quitting a club he has transformed into a byword for fluent, attacking football and guided to three Premier League titles and four FA Cups.

Explaining the length of time it has taken for him to finalise his new contract, which is worth a reported four million pounds a year, Wenger admitted he had been preoccupied by the aftermath of Henry's departure.

"I always said I wanted to focus on preparing the team," he said. "That was very important to us because we lost Henry but we were always talking."

Wenger looked badly fatigued as the Gunners laboured through a trophy-less 2006-07 season, for the latter part of which his captain, Henry, was injured.

Spain plan Puerta tribute

AFP, Madrid

Spain are hoping to have the name of defender Antonio Puerta, who died suddenly on the pitch two weeks ago, written on their shirts in Saturday's Euro 2008 match in Iceland.

The Spanish football federation are waiting for the green light from European football's governing body UEFA to go ahead with the request.

Spain are third in Group F behind Sweden and Northern Ireland and have little margin for error in Reykjavik if they want to get into the top two places and qualify for next year's finals in Austria and Switzerland.

Czech player fined \$10,000

AFP, Prague

A Czech footballer who gave a Nazi salute at the end of a first division match has been fined nearly 10,000 dollars, the Czech football association's disciplinary committee said Thursday.

Sparta Prague playmaker Pavel Horvath gave the salute at the end of Sparta's 4-1 away win over Viktoria Zizkov on August 25.

"We have accepted the (expert) opinion that Horvath has unfortunately made a Nazi gesture. Such gestures are intolerable," said committee chief, Alexander Karolyi.



Germany striker Miroslav Klose (C) and defender Philipp Lahm (R) undergo tailored routines during a fitness test in Cologne on Thursday.

PHOTO: AFP

Captain Klose

Football

AFP, Cologne

Miroslav Klose is set to captain his country for the first time as the veteran striker wins his 70th cap in Germany's Euro 2008 qualifier against Wales in Cardiff on Saturday.

With regular skipper Michael Ballack nursing an ankle injury and Bernd Schneider serving a one-match ban, Klose, the top-scorer at last year's World Cup, will be handed the captain's armband against the Welsh.

The Bayern Munich striker is expected to partner Schalke 04's Kevin Kuranyi up front, and with good reason. Between them the pair have more than 100 caps and over 50 goals.

Germany coach Joachim Loew, whose side are five points clear at the top of Group D and depart for Wales on Friday, is taking nothing for granted.

"Wales have a very aggressive team. They will deliver a great fight. We need to go toe-to-toe with them," said Loew.

Loew however seems sufficiently confident that - due to Ballack, Schneider and knee-injury victim Torsten Frings all missing - he is considering moving Bayern defender Philipp Lahm up into the midfield.

"I'll play wherever the coach tells me to play, it would be a challenge, but one I'd look forward to," said Lahm.

The 23-year-old was one of Germany's outstanding performers when a second-string German side beat England 2-1 at Wembley last month and looks set to join playmaker and Bayern Munich teammate Bastian Schweinsteiger in the midfield.

"Because we have so many players out, Bastian's role has increased," said Loew.

"We expect him to play much better than he did in Bayern's 1-1 draw in Hamburg. He has to be one of our leaders on Saturday."

In contrast, Wales coach John Toshack is expected to name an inexperienced side with Wolverhampton Wanderers pair, goalkeeper Wayne Hennessey and striker Freddy Eastwood, set to feature after impressive performances in Bulgaria.

Eastwood, 23, capped a stunning debut with the winning goal against Bulgaria last month while 20-year-old Hennessey kept the Welsh in the game with a string of last-gasp saves.

Hennessey admits he is walking in dreamland at the moment, even though his side are fifth in Group D with just seven points.

He kept a League record nine clean sheets in a row while playing on loan to Stockport last season and

will win his fourth cap on Saturday. "I can't believe what's happening to me. It's a bit of a blur, to be perfectly honest," said Hennessey.

"To suddenly be facing teams like the Czech Republic and Germany at my age is an incredible thing."

"But I try not to get nervous and I certainly will never count my chickens."

Lahm ruled out

AFP, Berlin

Germany defender Philipp Lahm has pulled out of the Euro 2008 group D qualifier against Wales in Cardiff after picking up an injury during a training session on Thursday.

The 23-year-old Bayern Munich player damaged ligaments in his left knee, meaning he has also been ruled out of the friendly against Romania in Cologne on September 12.

Following an examination on Friday Lahm said he would not return to action before the start of October, meaning he could miss Bayern's UEFA Cup first round, second leg date with Portuguese side Belenenses.

In Saturday's qualifier Lahm, a defender, had been set to be pushed up into Germany's midfield by coach Joachim Loew, due to the absence of injured Werder Bremen midfielder Torsten Frings.